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Rent ordinance fuels heated debate

Apartment
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NORTH BRUNSWICK — Some 300 residents, many of them senior citizens from the North Village and North Brunswick Garden apartment complexes, jammed the courtroom of the Municipal Building last night to support the township's rent control ordinance.

By contrast, only a handful of homeowners and an attorney for a major landlord criticized the ordinance at the Township Committee's public hearing.

The committee is considering plans to amend or abolish the six-year-old ordinance.

Although the committee did not take formal action last night, it now appears that the ordinance, which limits annual rent increases to 5.5 percent, will be amended rather than abolished or left unchanged, township officials indicated.

The most likely change, according to

Mayor Charles Nicola, would be a surcharge compensating for landlords' rising fuel costs.

"I think the probable ultimate result will be some sort of amendment to the ordinance we have," Nicola said after the 2½-hour hearing.

Nicola, who introduced rent control as a committeeman in 1972, now says he made an error and favors decontrol. "I don't think an error becomes a mistake unless it is left uncorrected," he said.

However, the mayor is in a minority. Three members of the five-man committee — Joseph Fekete, Sal Paladino and Tony Vitanza — have stated publicly they are in favor of maintaining rent control. The fifth member, Dominic Teneralli, is uncommitted, although he said last night the present ordinance is "unfair."

Sometimes jeering, sometimes cheering, the residents in the crowd took turns explaining, often vociferously, why they favored the 5.5 percent

rent ceiling.

Due to a lack of space, many residents were forced to stand in the aisles or the hallway outside the courtroom.

One sentiment expressed repeatedly by the tenants, many of whom said they were living on fixed incomes, was that they simply could not afford anything higher than annual 5.5 percent rent hikes.

Several said they would be forced to move if decontrol were instituted.

"I don't see why an (apartment) owner should get an increase," one Hidden Lake resident said, "if I can't."

Although an anonymous advertisement appearing in The Home News the past few days urged homeowners to attend the meeting and voice opposition to rent control, only a few opponents spoke last night.

The advertisement warned that if rent control were maintained, and apartment owners appeal to the county for tax reductions, a tax burden would be shifted to the homeowner.

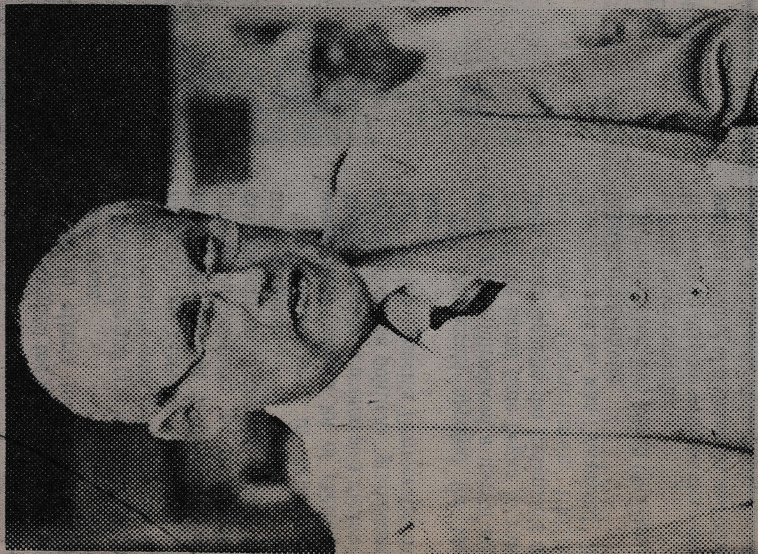
One homeowner, John Koribawi of Independence Boulevard, said rent control should be abolished. He was roundly booed.

Attorney William Ahern, representing owners of the 490-unit North Village Apartments, the largest in the township, told the committee that his client faced a hardship due to rising oil costs. The annual cost for oil in 1978 was \$165,000, Ahern said, while the cost this year in \$255,000.

Ahern said the owners of North Village did not necessarily favor complete decontrol, but rather a fuel surcharge or a compromise "that will be helpful to the renter and the owner and not harmful to the homeowner."

North Village is one of two township apartment complexes which have appealed to the county Board of Taxation for a reduction in property taxes due to financial hardship.

North Brunswick is one of 13 Middlesex County towns which have some sort of rent control.



DIALOGUE IN DECONTROL — Speaking for owners of North Village Apartments, attorney William Ahern, above, says rising oil costs are creating a financial hardship for his client. Meanwhile, some 300 township residents, mostly tenants, decry decontrol during meeting.



Home News photos by Dick Costello